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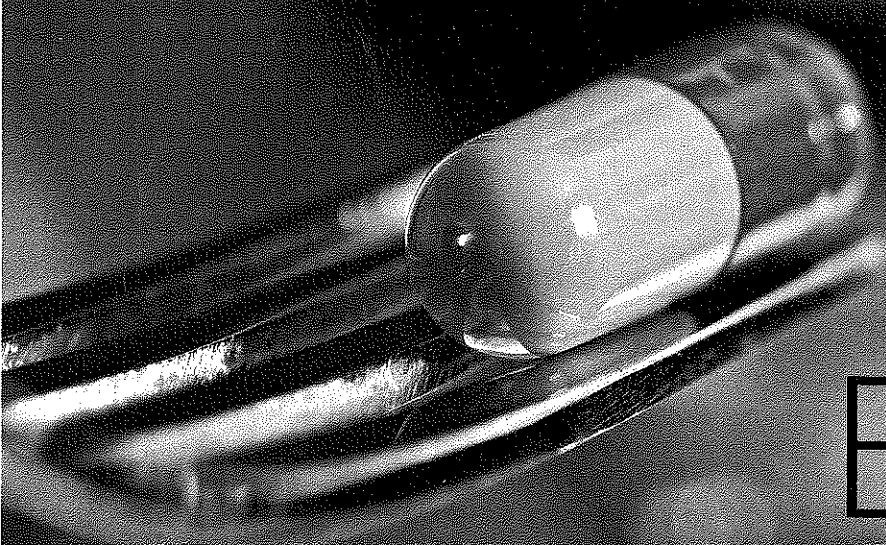
SPECIAL REPORT:

What could you

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GL SPECIAL REPORT



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PILLS

More and more girls are trying diet pills as a way to slim down fast before prom and swimsuit season. But beware—there's no such thing as a magic pill.

BY AUDREY D. BRASHICH

Last spring, 18-year-old Makeda S., of Brooklyn, N.Y., started to worry about looking good for her prom.

"I wanted my dress to fit just right," Makeda says. "And [to have] curves in the right places."

So she started making healthier eating choices and joined a gym. "I did everything I was supposed to, but I still couldn't drop the weight," she says.

To make matters worse, even though Makeda was never far from a healthy weight, she overheard two boys at school comparing her to a laughably obese movie character. "Knowing that's how they perceived me motivated me even more," says Makeda.

So she started taking over-the-counter herbal diet pills.

Within days, Makeda was suffering from dry mouth, bad breath and chapped lips. Her heart raced even when she was just walking around, and she often felt lightheaded.

"I blamed it on the heat since it was almost summer," Makeda says. "But in my mind, I knew it was the pills."

You may think that taking a few pills to lose weight is an easy, harmless fix, but tons of girls like Makeda will tell you it's simply not true. Researchers estimate that 63 percent of teen girls engage in unhealthy weight control behaviors—using diet pills or laxatives, fasting, vomiting or skipping meals. And approximately 25 percent of girls seeking to lose weight turn to diet supplements—many of whom are completely clueless to the scary side effects.

EMPTY PROMISES

So why are so many girls popping pills? Most are drawn to promises of great results with almost no work. After all, pledges such as "Lose weight with no exercise!" make it sound like diet pills can pretty much work miracles. Then there's the carefully crafted packaging.

"We're all programmed today to gravitate toward anything that says it's natural or organic," explains Dr. Jerry Weichman, an adolescent psychologist in Newport Beach, Calif. Which explains why most diet pill packages are decorated with flowers, fruits and vegetables, making them seem safe and healthy.

Diet supplements also have gotten a popularity boost recently because of celebrity endorsements or connections.

Just one tweet from Kim Kardashian bragging that she lost weight and toned up using the QuickTrim diet regimen reached millions of followers. And celebrity trainer Jillian Michaels (from TV's *The Biggest Loser*) has books, weight loss video games, exercise gear, plus a whole range of diet pills and protein powders with her name on them, even though she never went to school for fitness or nutrition.

We may all want curves like Kim or toned biceps like Jillian, but that doesn't mean those products are best for your body. Warns Theresa Albert, a nutritionist in Toronto, Ontario, and the author of *Ace Your Health*, "Just because someone's popular or famous doesn't mean they're qualified to be telling you how to eat or what to take."

UP ALL NIGHT

Most diet pills—which work by tricking your body into feeling full on less food—can be downright dangerous. Some formulas include diuretics (substances that make you shed water weight) and almost all of them include high dosages of caffeine (the amount in four sodas) plus stimulating, exotic herbs like ephedra or guarana.

More energy may seem like a plus, but almost always, the diet pill crash comes hard—and quick. That's just what happened to 15-year-old Rachel W., of Belle Vernon, Pa., when she and her friends started popping pills a few years ago. They'd heard that some of the older, pretty girls in school were doing it and decided to give them a try.

"None of us lost weight," says Rachel. "But they did give us a lot of energy. Too much, in fact."

Rachel and her friends all had trouble going to sleep and staying asleep all night. Rachel also recalls feeling like she was "speeding."

"I was so stressed, I'd wake up super early to get ready for school," Rachel says. "I was always on my toes. At the end of the day, I'd be exhausted and just feeling horrible."

That's because keeping your body amped up all the time can cause it to get run down. "Running yourself ragged strains the body," says Dr. Weichman. "Ultimately, it can lower the immune system and leave you more vulnerable to getting sick."

Continued on page 90

Continued from page 85

THE HUNGER GAMES

Some girls mistakenly think taking a pill means you can eat more and still magically lose weight. Just ask Sandy T., 16, from Hayward, Calif., who *gained* weight while taking diet pills last year.

"I'd take them in the morning, but by 11 a.m., which is way before I ever eat lunch, I'd be starving," she recalls.

She could have quit the pills. But the instructions on the package claimed they could take weeks or months to work. So Sandy kept taking them, hoping their slimming effects would kick in. When she checked her progress a few weeks later, she'd gained 6 pounds.

"Diet pills can do a great job of temporarily suppressing your appetite," says Dr. Jennifer Nardozi, a clinical psychologist in Miami. "But after a certain amount of time, they wear off. And your body is so famished, it's easy to swing the other way and eat compulsively."

HIDDEN DANGERS

Diet pills and supplements aren't regulated by the Food and Drug Administration

like medicines, so manufacturers aren't required to disclose all the ingredients. As a result, the FDA has deemed more than 70 weight loss products to be harmful because they contain undeclared ingredients and, in some cases, prescription drugs in amounts that exceed maximum recommended dosages.

Common side effects include mild dehydration and headaches to insomnia and high blood pressure. But in some cases, they're worse.

Ashley M., 19, from Lawrenceville, Ga., thought her diet pills consisted only of what was listed on the label, namely tropical fruits and blue green algae. Yet after only a few days of taking the pills, she felt constantly thirsty and her pee was darker than normal.

"I thought it was just toxins being flushed out of my body," she recalls. So she kept taking the pills. Then one day, she woke up and her vision was blurry.

"It was like when you put on someone else's glasses," Ashley says. "I couldn't see straight and kept hallucinating that people were talking to me."

As it turns out, her supplements contained an illegal medication believed to

have caused several heart attacks and one death. She stopped taking them.

PERMANENT DAMAGE

Taking diet pills as a teen can also set you up to have problems later on. Think of it this way: When pills suppress your appetite, you eat less, and by eating less, your body misses out on key nutrients it needs while you're developing.

"At mealtimes, I'd eat a piece of bread and be full," recalls Makeda. "So I'd skip salads, vegetables and other things my body really needed."

Another concern: These pills can permanently alter your metabolism. "They may work for you now," says Theresa. "But they can make it easier to gain weight later. Your body will no longer remember it's own set point when it comes to how many calories it needs."

Even scarier? Pills taken for a long duration can lead to organ failure.

"Your body needs calories to function," explains Dr. Adekemi Oguntala, an adolescent medicine physician in San Francisco. "If it doesn't get them from real food, then it's going to break down muscle stores you have."

And since your body can't distinguish between your bulging biceps and the muscles that operate your internal organs, it just starts to break them all down, which can put you on a path to a permanent shutdown.

BACK TO BASICS

Despite the pressure to shape up quickly for a dance or summertime at the pool, diet pills are not the solution.

"Many eating disorders start with an 'innocent' diet—often aided by supplements—to shed a few pounds," explains Dr. Nardozi. "And then things get out of control."

Makeda wishes she knew this before she popped that first pill. Along with all of the scary things that happened as a result, she also eventually gained back all the weight she lost. Now, she's focused on staying healthy the right way.

"People shouldn't rely on diet pills to do the work for them," she says. "Because in the long run, balanced eating and exercise still work best." ❀

"What I Wish I Knew"

Before you pop that diet pill, check out this former addict's letter to her 17-year-old self.

Dear Andrea,

Whatever you do, when senior year rolls around, please don't start taking diet pills. Take it from me: It's easier than you think to get hooked—and it's going to lead to a full-blown eating disorder and years of struggle.

If you start now, by the time you're 21, your heart is going to be going crazy. You're going to faint regularly because your body's chemistry will be imbalanced. Your hair is going to start falling out. You're going to be thirsty all the time—and, by the way, if that happens, then DRINK. Being thirsty is not a sign that the pills are working to burn calories. Neither is an irregular heart-beat. Those are actually signs from your body that you've gone too far and need to get yourself some serious help.

Also, when you get married and move to Paris, don't worry so much about gaining weight. And when you're there, don't even think about trying European diet pills and stocking up on those to bring back home. Because if you do, you'll keep taking them right up until you find out you're pregnant. And then, one hour after giving birth, your heart is going to start acting funny. You might think it's a panic attack, but it won't be. It will be a heart attack caused by years of taking harmful pills. You'll recover, but you will have ruined your health.

So take it from me: Your body is too precious to risk damaging. Be proud of the way you look because it's you—and you're amazing. (I should know.)

XO, ANDREA